Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy

Review update: September 2026

Next Update: September 27

At Next Steps Education, we believe that every person matters.

Equality, diversity and inclusion are not separate initiatives, tick box policies or compliance exercises. They sit at the heart of who we are, how we work, and how we treat one another. We believe EDI is reflected in every conversation, relationship, decision and opportunity we create.

Our work exists to remove barriers, build meaningful relationships and create opportunities for people to thrive. We see diversity as a strength, inclusion as a responsibility, and belonging as something everybody deserves.

This policy details our commitments to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and the mechanisms and structures we have put in place to achieve these commitments. Our approach in this policy is guided by our values:

People First! We recognise the dignity, worth and individuality of every person.

Everyone Has Impact The way we speak, act and make decisions affects those around us.

Be Honest and Direct, with Optimism We address barriers openly, challenge discrimination and seek solutions together.

Together, We Raise the Bar Higher Different experiences and perspectives strengthen our organisation and improve outcomes for young people.

Excellence Is a State of Mind Inclusive practice is part of professional excellence and continuous improvement.

Intention

We comply fully with the Equality Act 2010 and oppose discrimination, harassment, bullying and victimisation in all forms. However, our ambition goes beyond legal compliance. We seek to create an environment where people feel they belong, where differences are respected, and where everyone has a fair opportunity to succeed.

We recognise the nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Race
- Religion or belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

We also recognise that barriers to participation and opportunity may be experienced by people for reasons beyond those protected by law, including SEND, neurodivergence, mental health needs, care experience, socio-economic disadvantage, family circumstances, communication differences and previous educational experiences. We will seek to understand and respond to individual needs wherever it is reasonable and appropriate to do so.

Scope and Application

Our commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and this policy, extends to our students, families, employees, applicants for employment, freelance tutors and mentors, commissioners, partner organisations, contractors, visitors and all who work with or engage with Next Steps Education. We aim to create an environment in which every person who interacts with Next Steps Education is treated with respect, dignity and fairness and is supported to contribute.

Towards Our Community

We recognise that exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation can increase vulnerability. We actively promote a culture of belonging through our relational approach, reflective supervision, student voice activities, family engagement, safer recruitment practices, staff training and ongoing quality assurance processes. We recognise that inclusive environments help people feel safer, more connected and better able to thrive.

We recognise that many of the young people referred to Next Steps Education have experienced barriers, exclusion or periods of unmet need. Our relational approach seeks to understand each individual's strengths, needs, interests and aspirations so that support can be tailored appropriately and opportunities for engagement, learning and personal growth can be increased.

As Employers

With regard to our position as equal opportunity employers, Next Steps Education is fully committed to treating everyone fairly and without bias. This policy particularly applies to:

- Recruitment and selection processes, practices and procedures within Next Steps Education
- Job descriptions and job specifications in all areas
- Training and career development opportunities available to all employees
- Terms and conditions of employment for all employees
- Access to employee benefits and facilities
- Application of all policies and procedures including grievance, disciplinary and absence policies or procedures

What Inclusion looks like at Next Steps

Inclusion at Next Steps means listening to people, valuing different perspectives, making reasonable adjustments where appropriate, removing barriers to participation, and ensuring people feel respected, safe and able to contribute.

In practice, this means we:

- learn about the strengths, needs and aspirations of individuals
- seek and act upon student, family and staff voice
- adapt our approaches where reasonable and appropriate
- celebrate different experiences and perspectives

- challenge assumptions, stereotypes and exclusionary behaviours
- create environments where people can participate, contribute and belong

We recognise that inclusion is not something done to people. We seek the views of students, families, employees and other stakeholders when developing services, improving practice and removing barriers.

Our Commitments

To turn our values into action, we commit to:

- identifying and removing unnecessary barriers to participation, learning and employment
- promoting inclusive practice through training, supervision and quality assurance
- listening to and acting upon feedback from students, families, team members and partners
- making decisions fairly, consistently and transparently
- considering reasonable adjustments and individual needs wherever it is reasonable and appropriate to do so
- challenging discrimination, harassment, victimisation and exclusionary behaviour
- reviewing our practices regularly and learning from concerns, complaints and lived experience

Roles and Responsibilities

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is everyone's responsibility. Next Steps Education requires all members of our community to commit to:

- treating others with dignity and respect
- challenging discrimination where appropriate
- reporting concerns
- contributing to an inclusive culture

All employees and contractors have a duty to co-operate with Next Steps Education to make sure that this policy is effective in ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion and in preventing discrimination. Action will be taken under our disciplinary procedures against any employee who is found to have committed an act of improper or unlawful discrimination against a job applicant or employee or against a third party who does

business with Next Steps Education, such as a client, customer, contractor, supplier or student.

Recruitment, Employment and Service Delivery

Next Steps Education actively promotes equality, diversity and inclusion through our recruitment, employment and service delivery practices. We:

- use safer recruitment processes designed to attract and assess candidates fairly and responsibly; using job criteria to shortlist, assessing candidates' suitability on interview responses and task outcomes; and making recruitment decisions based on skills, experience, values and organisational need
- provide induction and ongoing training on equality, diversity, inclusion and safeguarding for all employees and contractors, including actions they can take to create an environment free from discrimination
- consider reasonable adjustments throughout recruitment and employment; sending our questions to candidates before interviews, offering reasonable adjustments pre- interview, signposting and leading discussions around possible reasonable adjustments
- make decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, development and progression on merit, skills, experience and organisational need
- review policies, procedures and working practices to identify and remove unnecessary barriers
- seek feedback from students, families, commissioners and team members to improve inclusivity
- challenge discriminatory behaviour and address concerns promptly
- work to ensure our educational approaches, environments and communications are accessible and inclusive
- design and adapt educational provision in ways that recognise individual strengths, needs, interests and aspirations, helping young people access meaningful opportunities for learning, engagement and personal growth

Reasonable Adjustments

We will fulfil our legal duty to consider reasonable adjustments and will seek practical ways to remove barriers wherever it is reasonable and appropriate to do so, including, but not limited to:

- adapting communication styles
- considering sensory needs
- valuing lived experience
- seeking student and family voice
- challenging exclusion

We recognise that raising requests for reasonable adjustments may challenge individuals who may benefit from them, and as organisation leaders, commit to curiosity, openness and proactive communication to promote inclusive practice and differentiation.

Raising Concerns

Any member of our community may raise a concern regarding equality, diversity and inclusion. Clients, parents and students should use the channels we have created for this purpose; Raise a Concern Button on every page of our website, on-site suggestion boxes, or by telephoning or emailing their placement contact.

All employees and contractors are responsible for ensuring that any suspected discriminatory acts or practices are brought to the attention of their manager. Any victimisation or retaliation against employees bringing a complaint will be investigated and may result in dismissal. Employees and contractors should put their concern in writing to their line manager or a company director.

Complaints raised will be responded to in line with our Complaints Policy or Grievance Policy, whichever is relevant to the parties involved.

Breaches of this Policy

Discrimination, harassment, bullying, victimisation, intimidation or exclusionary behaviour by employees, contractors and volunteers of Next Steps Education may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal, termination of engagement or removal from services as appropriate.

Serious breaches of this policy statement will be treated as potential gross misconduct and may result in dismissal. Employees and contractors should bear in mind that they

can be held personally liable for any act of unlawful discrimination in the course of their employment. This covers discrimination both in the workplace and in any work-related setting outside the workplace, for example during business trips, at external training events or at work-related social events and functions. It also covers discrimination in work-related online settings and electronic communications.

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

We commit to reviewing our policies, practices, training and feedback mechanisms regularly to identify opportunities to improve accessibility, inclusion and equality of opportunity.

All terms of employment, benefits, facilities, services and employment practices and procedures are reviewed from time to time, to ensure fairness and that there is no unlawful direct or indirect discrimination because of one or more of the protected characteristics.

We monitor the effectiveness of this policy through feedback from our community, quality assurance activities, any complaints and concerns raised, safeguarding processes, policy reviews, workforce information where appropriate, and reflective supervision and management oversight. Where improvement opportunities are identified, we will take reasonable steps to address them.

Summary Statement

At Next Steps Education, we believe people achieve their best when they feel seen, heard, valued and safe. We are committed to creating an environment where differences are respected, barriers are challenged, and everyone has the opportunity to belong and thrive. Company Directors are responsible for promoting the principles of this policy, modelling inclusive behaviours, ensuring concerns are taken seriously and supporting continuous improvement across the organisation.